Background of The 2002 Beyond Durban Symposium

The University of Iowa Crossing Borders, The Ford Foundation

South Asian Studies Program

The chief sponsor of the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance was the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson; other sponsoring agencies were the World Health Organization and UN AIDS (UNHCHR 2001). After intensive and often difficult deliberations on a number of issues, the Conference adopted a Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA 2001) that committed member States to undertake a wide range of measures to address the following themes: (i) sources, causes, forms and contemporary manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; (ii) victims of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; (iii) measures of prevention, education and protection aimed at the eradication of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance at the national, regional and international levels; (iv) provision of effective remedies, recourse, redress, compensatory and other measures at the national, regional and international levels; (v) strategies to achieve full and effective equality, including international cooperation, and enhancement of United Nations and other international mechanisms in combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and follow-up.

The participation of the United States in the Durban conference was controversial from the beginning, and, as is well known, the US withdrew before serious dialog began. On the eve of the conference Secretary of State Colin Powell announced that the U.S. delegation was leaving, saying that the conference was bound to “contain hateful language against Israel, and that negotiations would be futile.” The US was not the only country whose presence/absence caused controversy and dissent in Durban and at home, however. India’s participation generated multiple challenges to the official approach to caste in the Indian context, and the Indian government opposed the move to bring caste within the ambit of the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Indians in India witnessed many subsequent debates (reproduced in daily newspapers, magazines and scholarly journals such as Economic and Political Weekly and Seminar) between scholars who took up varying positions on the relationship among caste, race, and nation.

One result of these debates has been a growing realization among scholars of India that caste needs to be theorized in radically different ways using recent developments in our understanding of the operations of power, identity formation, and social reproduction. As American scholars of India (and of South Asia generally) we in the South Asian Studies Program see strong reasons for a dialogue to occur seriously between theorists and activists of caste in India and race in the USA. We can begin to do this by reexamining what happened at Durban, by seriously working out in what sense caste and race occupy the same space, and then going on to consider the means by which they may be successfully worked against in today’s concrete social and political situation.